

## Bird Migration at the San Dieguito Lagoon

Ed Mirsky | Hoska Dr.



American Avocet

The most memorable experience I've had birding during the migration season occurred when I was in college. A friend who is an expert birder asked if I would like to go to Santa Barbara Island with the Los Angeles Audubon. Of course! The chartered fishing boat left at dawn on a cold and foggy morning and we looked for pelagic birds on choppy seas on our way to the island. We departed the boat one at a time, a ranger grabbed an arm to help us from the boat to the small landing as the boat bobbed in the water. Shortly after we began birding my friend heard a soft *tslip*, a chip note made by a small warbler in the fog overhead, and called out "Wilson's Warbler." Soon, another expert hearing a soft *witch* call as another bird passed in the fog shouted "Connecticut Warbler." And so the morning went as literally hundreds of warblers, some from wintering grounds as far away as Costa Rica, landed on the island and immediately began to forage.

The birds were flying north along the Pacific Flyway. For most of the birds we see at the Lagoon this is the path that is coded into them. The Connecticut Warbler was an

exception. It seems to have taken a “wrong turn.” Most of his kind use the Atlantic Flyway to reach breeding grounds that extend across central Canada.

Similar, but not as dramatic migrations occur at the San Dieguito Lagoon when migrating flycatcher, sparrows, and warblers arrive in small numbers, and shorebirds, geese, and ducks arrive in mass. The San Dieguito monthly bird count has been conducted on the first Sunday of the month since 2010. The highest numbers counted one morning during that period were 589 Western Sandpipers in February 2010, 328 Least Sandpipers in January 2011, and 660 American Wigeon in 2017 to name a few.

There are many patterns of migration among bird species. The most common is for a specie to “winter” at the lagoon and depart in the spring for their summer breeding ground, in some cases as far away as the arctic. Two examples of this pattern are the Least Sandpiper and the Green-winged Teal.

Another migration pattern is for a species that has a resident population in Southern California to have other populations that migrate during the summer breeding season. This is common among shorebird such as the American Avocet, ducks such as Gadwall, and raptors such as and the Peregrine Falcon.

Others, such as the Least Tern, migrate to the lagoon to breed — at least that is the hope. The Least Tern winters across marine coastlines of Central and South America, and returns to nest on relatively open beaches and islands kept free of vegetation. None has nested in any of the five white-sand nest sites built throughout the lagoon during the restorations, but there are productive colonies that have endured for years in the county.

Yet another, is for nonbreeding birds to remain at the lagoon while adults go to the summer breeding grounds. This is the reason Spotted Sandpipers are seen along the shores of sloughs and channels during the breeding season.

Among birds, other than shorebirds and duck, a common migration pattern is to pass through the lagoon during migration to and from the breeding grounds. The Rufous Hummingbird migrates from as far as the tropics of central Mexico to its breeding grounds, which extends from near the California-Oregon border to Anchorage, Alaska, and back to its wintering grounds after a short breeding season. By the way, our backyard bird often confused with Rufous is the Allen’s Hummingbird.

These migratory patterns beg the question, How can so many similar species of birds use the lagoon during migration? A hint is offered by the American Avocet. Avocets are striking shorebird with an upturned bill, a stylish rusty head and neck, and a black-and-white wing pattern. They sweep the bill from side-to-side over the surface of the water to collect aquatic invertebrates in shallow water while wading or swimming. This technique enables them to capture small invertebrates unavailable to other species. But how do look-alike gray shorebirds find enough food at the lagoon? To answer that question, go to the lagoon and observe and wonder.